



What is a Dune Steward? You Can Be One, Too!

By Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward Tim Donovan

In the summer of 2008, the Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward program hosted a guided tour of Deer Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The goal was to educate tour participants about the duties and responsibilities of the Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Stewards and how the public can serve as informal stewards of the fragile ecosystem.

Tour participants learned how they, too, could be informal stewards by following site-specific regulations and promoting environmentally sound-use of the resource.

Eastern Lake Ontario dune stewards work to protect properties providing public access along the 17-mile Eastern Lake Ontario Dunes & Wetlands Area (ELODWA). Natural forces and human impacts threaten the fragile dune ecosystem. The stewards encourage proper recreational use of this unique natural resource area and collect visitor usage and violation data at Deer Creek Marsh WMA, Sandy Pond Beach Natural Area, Lakeview WMA, Black Pond WMA, and El Dorado Beach Preserve.

In the wetlands sheltered by the dunes, numerous plant and wildlife habitats are protected from the brutal forces of Lake Ontario. Dune blowouts are one of the largest threats to the dune system. Dune blowouts — typically U-shaped areas of open migrating sand — can occur when beachgrass is disturbed by natural or artificial means. As the sand migrates inland, it can bury and kill the inland forest as well as fill in the inland wetland.

To prevent blowouts, the Dune Stewards encourage visitors to use designated dune walkovers and trails and discourage climbing and walking on the dunes. The use of vehicles (motorized and non-motorized) is prohibited on the dunes. These actions can trample vegetation and erode the fragile sand dunes.

The Stewards also work with local organizations to plant beachgrass, install protective fences along the dune areas, and remove manmade debris from the shoreline. Installation of beachgrass and fencing holds sand in place, promoting sand accumulation and dune growth.



Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward Tim Donovan explains data collection procedures to shoreline visitors. Photo: Mary Penney, New York Sea Grant

A Primer on the Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward Program

Why ELODWA Needs Stewards

- Threats to sand dunes are natural and manmade
- These sand dunes were created thousands of years ago
- Sand dunes shelter diverse species in wetlands from brutal forces of Lake Ontario
- Sand dunes are fragile
- ELODWA is globally significant as part of the Great Lakes sand dunes — the largest collection of freshwater sand dunes in the world!

What Stewards Do

- Educate the public about ecologically-responsible recreational usage and site-specific regulations
- Educate the public about the plant and wildlife that the dunes and the species diversity in the wetlands the dunes protect
- Protect the dunes from natural threats (e.g., wind and water erosion) through partnerships for the installation of protective features (fencing and plantings)
- Protect the dunes against human impacts, by advising public users about not hiking, biking, and using vehicles in restricted areas
- Collect visitor usage and violation data to illustrate trends for local agencies

How You Can Be an Informal Steward — It's Easy!

- Follow area regulations, e.g., keep dogs on leash, no driftwood collecting, no fires, no camping, and staying out of restricted areas (e.g., dunes and bird sanctuaries)
- Educate friends and family on the importance of the dunes and ways to enjoy them without damaging them
- Help pick up litter: Carry-in, Carry-out is part of the educational mission of the dune stewards
- Official Eastern Lake Ontario Dune and Salmon River Stewards are selected by application and interview in the spring each year. Watch for notices recruiting college and graduate students



Steward Tim Donovan (left) describes dune habitats. Photo: Mary Penney, New York Sea Grant

For More Info: Eastern Lake Ontario Dune & Salmon River Steward Program, 315-312-3042

The Eastern Lake Ontario Dune Steward & Salmon River Steward Program is managed by New York Sea Grant in partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, New York State Parks, and The Nature Conservancy

